GENERAL JELOSH LEARNS TO WASH HIS FACE

The Narrative of a Practical Missionary Whose Rod Was Water and Whose Staff Was Soap---When She Could Get Any

Cleanliness is kin to cheerfulness

A convert to the shower bath

[Miss Cleveland's work in Albania, the most primitive and tribal of all European countries, has been perhaps the most interesting and picturesque experience which any American girl has had in Europe. During her twelve months in this isolated country, which the natives call "Shipniya," she has learned to speak eight of the native dialects, and has been officially "adopted" by most of the important tribes.]

By Elizabeth Cleveland

SCUTARI, Albania.

YESTERDAY it was necessary for me to make a trip to the north, on the edge of the tribal lines of the Kastrati. At military headquarters I met General Jelosh Joka, the Albanian hero, whose deeds are praised in one of the national songs that spring from the hearts of these people. "Pray to God for Jelosh Joka, King of the Mountaineers," the refrain runs, as the children sing it every day on our playground.

He is a splendid figure, this old Albanian. Tall, as all his mountain people are, straight, commanding, with keen eyes that deserve, as so few eyes outside of fiction do, to be compared with those of the eagle that gives Albania its quaint native name, "Shipniya." He wore the costume of his clan, the trousers of black-braided, felt-lined cloth, the many-colored sash that holds silver-hilted pistols, the long blue coat lined with red, the red-embroidered waistcoat crossed in front, and half a dozen marvelously wrought chains of heavy silver around his neck. His troops, in ragged remnants of the same costume, stood behind him, silent and respectful.

"I thank America for what you have brought us," he said. "Since you have come I have learned to wash my hair and my garments. I have learned what it means to the soul to be clean. We did not know these things, we men of Shipniya, before you came. Shipniya has been always at war to save her lands and her people, since first the Slav came down from the North many thousands of years ago. That is the reason we have forgotten these things. But you have told us, and we are glad. We are grateful. We thank you, and I," he smiled, "I who have learned to be clean, I thank you."

This was a very remarkable speech to come from the lips of the most famous chieftain in all the Albanian mountains. The influence of our "Children's Clearing House" in Scutari had spread without our knowing it, through the voices of children in their homes clamoring to be washed, and had reached even the heights of Kastrati. The story of this "Children's Clearing House," an institution undoubtedly unique in the world, is worth telling.

When I came to Scutari for the American Junior Red Cross I found a city of 30,000 inhabitants, the center of the northern Albanian tribes, who had been at war almost continuously for twelve years.

Turkish, Montenegrin, Serbian, Greek, Bulgarian and Austrian armies had successively ravaged their lands, razed their stone villages and slaughtered their people. The armistice in the west—ferociously seconded by the unconquered and still fighting bands in the mountains—had driven out the Austrians, and Scutari was occupied by international Allied troops under the command of the French.

It was necessary to remember, as a basis for any action in the chaos, that the Albanian people, though forced by centuries of oppression and warfare to the most primitive and even barbarous methods of living, are the bearers of an extremely complex culture and civilization which they have maintained from prehistoric times. They have preserved it by unrelaxing enmity to every form of foreign influence. They are passionately and pathetically eager to seize upon any opportunity to develop themselves, but an attempt to impose upon them ideas and methods, however good, that were not in harmony with their own desires has always failed. They are an intensely cohesive people. Even antagonistic religions, which have so divided the Eastern peoples, broke harmlessly against this race feeling and I found Moslems, Roman Catholics and Greek Orthodox Albanians living amicably together, taking each other as refugees into already crowded rooms, and sharing the same classwork in the schools.

There were ten of these schools, part of the young national school system, and teaching about twelve hundred children. These children were as well fed and cared for as could be expected in a country so weakened by twelve years of war. The greatest need for help was among the children of the streets, too hungry, ragged or diseased to go to school. These children, among whom there were about 300 orphans in the city, were mainly refugees from the borders, from Kossova, held by Serbia, and from the poverty-devastated mountain villages. They slept in the street or in hovels, their rags swarmed with lice, and nearly all of them had favus of milder scalp diseases.

The problem was to utilize our not very large resources of relief materials and medical supplies so as to return these children to school and society crippled as little as possible by the mental and physical wounds of refugee life. The first temptation was to open an asylum for them, a home where at least some of them could be fed, sheltered, clothed and educated.

But the effect of war is, after all, merely an acute accentuation of the permanent evils of society. Stripped to the bare essential, the problem was poverty. These children had nothing, but, destitute of everything that maintains life, they were still part of the social structure. To take a few of them out of it, into an environment, however excellent, that was essentially artificial, would be, I felt, less a solution of the problem than an avoidance of it. They must have help, but I wanted to give it to them in a way that would reestablish them in their own social structure instead of taking them out of it.

We began by opening, in spite of incredible difficulties and with material brought across Europe, over the Adriatic and up from Durazzo by motor truck, a little house where thirty children of school age could be bathed, fed and taken care of while their widowed mothers were working—or looking for work. When we opened the gates on the first morning fifty children crowded the narrow, stone-walled street; next day there were fifty more.

With much pressure the institution did not so much grow as burst from its small plant. In June, 1920, we moved to a beautiful, large house whose surrounding walls inclose a big garden and playground. We were just in time to receive the masses of refugee children who poured down into the city before the Serbian invasion from the north.

We named the place the Children's Clearing House. It is open all day, but we keep no child over night. There are baths, a dispensary, school rooms where the children are taught until we can place them in the Albanian schools, and a cafeteria dining room where hot luncheons are served. There is one inflexible rule: No child can continue to come inside the gates unless he is clean and free from vermin.

Personally I needed encouragement in being hard-hearted. It was like entering a besieged castle to go through the gates into the clean, happy place inside the walls. Every morning, and all day long, the street was a mass of wailing women and beseeching hands. Kel Ndoya, the old Albanian who guards the gates and looks imperial in his tight, black-braided white trousers, scarlet-lined blue coat, barbaric sash and embroidered waistcoat, could not awe into silence the heartbreaking prayers that followed me.

"We are asking more than human beings can do," I said, weakening. "These people have no homes, they sleep in wretched heaps in stables and dirty barracks, they have no soap, no changes of clothes. They can't keep themselves clean. We are brutes to demand it. It would be different if they even understood what we mean, but they don't know what cleanliness is. They never have been clean."

It was the nurse in the dispensary who stiffened my morale at such times. She had the blessed inflexibility of her profession. "Nonsense," she said. "If they don't know let them learn. They don't have to have soap and hot water to get rid of lice. They can wash their clothes in the Kiri River; it's full of water. If they haven't a complete change of clothes let them wash their garments one at a time. Any one can be clean, with determination enough."

We had on our side the strong family feeling of the Albanian people. Every child had at least a distantly related cousin, an older sister, an uncle or a godfather, who wanted the child to have the American food. Every child who came to our gates was taken in, bathed, treated at the dispensary and given enough garments to clothe him. After that, we left the responsibility upon his guardian. He could come back every day so long as he was clean. The weather was clear and hot, and when the rivers dried there was water in the wells.

"My little one is hungry and there is no food in my house. For the love of God give him food. You will be doing a great charity to give him only a piece of bread," a mother said to me one day outside the gates. She had with her the boy we had sent out that afternoon. I turned back his shirt collar and showed her why we had done it.

"We are not here to do a great charity," I said sternly. "We are here to show you how to live, cleanly and without lice."

"But why do you wish the lice to leave my son?" she demanded, indignantly. "Lice will leave only a dead body. It is healthy to have them."

But the insistence of a hungry child, backed by the rule that cost so much on both sides of our walls, was stronger than the habits of a lifetime in the shadow of the war. The next morning her son, scrubbed and strutting, was back on the playground.

The development of the Children's Clearing House came from the children themselves. It was good to see them revive, stand upright, and begin to thrive, like wilted plants given water. Cleanliness, one meal a day, and gradually healing scalps and sores, gave them back their sturdiness and self-respect. You recognized newcomers by the look in their eyes, the refugee look that shows a spiritual harm more terrible than the breaking of the body. In a week it began to fade; in two weeks it was a shadow; in a month it was gone. Yet these children went back every night to the earthen-floored hovels packed with refugees, where, with rags for a bed and an old oil-can for water, they fought alone their battles for cleanliness.

Our inflexible rule had been an experiment. There were times when I felt it must fail, that it could not possibly succeed against the odds. We were cheered when the children began to show a passion for being clean and a horror of vermin that exceeded ours. For familiarity bred in us the callousness which the children had quite lost. Every Friday morning we held inspection; three hundred children passed anxiously and gravely under the exploring hands of the interpreter, and black social disgrace fell upon the unhappy one whose clothing showed the slightest trace of the typhus carriers. He was sent through the gates into exile; he had no luncheon next day and no part in the Saturday games. And the triumphant day came when among the three hundren there were only three who were not clean and clothed in spotless white undergarments.

The walking club was an outgrowth of the Saturday games. So was the sweater club, suggested by the little girls whose immemorial occupation, while herding the sheep in the mountains, has been knitting. We gave them wool, and each of them chose a little newcomer as protégé and knitted stockings or a sweater for him. After that came the "baby club." The first baby appeared as a visitor, brought by a proud eleven-year-old uncle. There was excitement on the playground and much bragging about other babies, alleged to be even bigger and prettier. The wiser course, if we were not to be inundated with babies, was to suggest that they could all be brought on a certain afternoon. Fifty-three babies arrived, painfully washed for the occasion, and only two passed the solemn inspection which we held in conclave. Next day the baby club informally asked us to tell it about babies, and met to listen while the nurse gave a lecture on baby care and the interpreter translated. The routine now is a lecture every alternate Friday, and baby inspection on the other Friday. Children who are really too small to carry babies have been made to leave theirs at home, so the membership has been cut to forty-six, and at the last meeting forty-five of them were clean.

The Children's Clearing House has been open for eight months. Our daily attendance is three hundred and over. As soon as a child has sufficiently recovered from the mental and physical effects of refugee life we have entered him as a pupil in one of the Albanian schools, continuing to give him luncheon every day and keeping him an integral part of our community life. Over two hundred children have been so entered since last fall. The remaining third are sickly children or recent arrivals who are in our own school rooms every day. Every child who has the privilege of entering our gates must pass the Friday inspections. Including children no longer in need of our help and those who have returned to mountain villages, seven hundred and twenty-one children have thus lived for a time under the influence of the cleanliness-idea. The house is so arranged that the children are able in line to pass one by one through the washroom to wash their hands in running water before every meal, drying them on paper to avoid the common towel. Water drinking on the playground, with the problem of common cups, was solved in a necessarily primitive but effective manner. A gasoline bidon was cleaned and fitted with faucet and cover like an ordinary water cooler. For it we made a table of packing boxes with a frame on either side. Into these frames fit boxes of wire screen, holding the cups, which are sterilized in the kitchen by the simple method of immersing the screen boxes in boiling water. Two proud monitors are trusted with the task of seeing that each child uses a clean cup.

Our bathing arrangements consist of a perforated pipe run overhead in a cement floored room. Five children at a time can—and joyfully do—bathe beneath the uncertain shower. Soap must, of course, be imported and is as precious in the children's eyes as in ours. But the bathing habit becomes a fixed and inexorable passion. Families of nine children living in one room with no furniture except a few rugs on an earth floor tell us proudly that each one of them has had a bath twice a week since leaving our house, and the mountain children who went back to their villages and were driven down again by the border war returned clean. "I bathed them as much as I could," their mothers say, "and you will see that they have no lice."

The value of such a clearing station in refugee work was unknown to our unit here when we began it. It was an experiment which has brought results that surprise us. To enter a community of outcasts desperately in need of every necessity of life and to give them only small rations of food and clothing, these at the price of incredible effort on their part, often required a courage that we could hardly have maintained if we had not sustained each other. But the effect has been not only to overcome the intellectual and moral devastation of refugeeism but to spread a new kind of energy and self-respect among people whose only contact with us was through their children.

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Do You Travel With Wets or Drys? Here They Are as Pictured 70 Years Ago

Group wood cut of Wets at the time of the Maine Law Petition in the early '50s. No "left to right" names available

Assemblage of the Dry forces back of the Maine Law Petition. Both groups appeared in Harper's Magazine for July, 185